

EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION SERIES

LITERACY FOR ALL

A FRAMEWORK FOR
ANTI-OPPRESSIVE TEACHING



SHAWNA COPPOLA

ROUTLEDGE


“With incisive precision, clarity, and refreshing veracity, Coppola’s *Literacy for All* offers a framework that equips readers with the tools needed to engage in expansive literacy practices that underscore the cognitive and social aspects of literacy, support the internal and external work necessary to sustain liberatory literacy practices and honor the research and scholarship of those whose expertise, though critical, is often not centered. This work is a vital addition to your literacy instruction toolkit.”

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“*Literacy for All: A Framework for Anti-Oppressive Teaching* walks readers through literacy movements and current debates while maintaining a critical lens on how our identities and relationships to communities impact our teaching. Coppola brings a wealth of knowledge about the definitions of literacy, sociocultural approaches to literacy, and ways to unmask the oppression embedded in dominant narratives of literacy instruction. This book carefully looks across literacy theory and methods through the lens of a thoughtful framework that recognizes the role of our positionalities, the internal and external work that is necessary when teaching, and the research-based approaches we must be aware of if we are indeed doing literacy work that is transformative and liberating. *Literacy for All* is a must-read for all teachers, literacy coaches, and those who want to nurture an anti-oppressive literacy culture in their schools. This book will impact our teacher journeys and help transform institutions.”

—Carla España, Assistant Professor of Bilingual Education and Puerto Rican/Latinx and Latin American Studies, Department of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies, Brooklyn College, City University of New York

“*Literacy for All* is a call for a more focused, complete, and unflinchingly honest approach to building literacy. Coppola brings expertise, experience, and, most importantly, humanity to the national discussion

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—Tom Rademacher, Author of *It Won't Be Easy* and *Raising Ollie*

“Wow! Shawna Coppola has created a comprehensive yet digestible literacy framework that envelops an enormous breadth of research and history without overwhelming readers. She lays out why we must enact classroom and systemic change but more importantly, she shows educators how. Yes, this is the path to *Literacy for All*. More aptly, even, *Required Reading for All*.”

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—Christopher Lehman, Founding Director,
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LITERACY FOR ALL

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Every student comes to the classroom with unique funds of knowledge in addition to unique needs. How can teachers celebrate and draw upon the valuable literacies each child already possesses to engage them more effectively in school literacy practices?

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Literacy For All

A Framework for
Anti-Oppressive Teaching

Shawna Coppola

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For Maureen



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I recently had the opportunity to spend an entire day in community with members, supporters, and leaders of a local antiracist organization as part of their volunteer-training program. Part of the day's work involved using the Building Movement Project's Social Change Ecosystem Map (2018), created by author and activist Deepa Iyer, on the individual roles we played within a larger ecosystem—in the dismantling of racial oppression.

With the support of our dynamic facilitator, Kevin, I was able to identify fairly quickly what roles I connected to most readily (*disruptor, weaver, guide*) as well as what roles I felt less connected to. In addition, I was able to identify the roles that others with whom I am in community around this work often play (e.g., *caregiver, storyteller, builder*). Kevin helped me and the rest of my co-conspirators to think deeply about *why* we connected to certain roles over others and how important it is to ensure that we are “in relation” with folks who help round out our ecosystem and hold us accountable to our goals around equity and justice.

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Introduction

I am someone for whom literacy—*print* literacy, anyway—came both rapidly and easily. I have very early memories, made more vivid with photographs, of pretending to be “sick” so I could lounge on our ’70s-era davenport in my footie pajamas and “read” my mom’s magazines, of lying in bed with my dad at bedtime as he read every word—copyright page included!—of *The Runaway Bunny*.

I was accurately reciting *The Monster at the End of This Book: Starring Lovable, Furry Old Grover* by age 2, gleefully shouting out the names of street signs from the back seat of the car at 3. When I began reading my grammy’s old, musty Nancy Drew books at age 4, I was declared “gifted” and promptly enrolled in a local, private kindergarten where, for the very first time in my life—

—I felt utterly and hopelessly inept.

Now, to be fair, my first kindergarten teachers had a bit of a cruel streak—or at least, it seemed that way to my 4-year-old self. I can remember, for example, how they’d lock the bathroom door after recess and force my classmates and me to wait until returning home to relieve ourselves, spanking us in full view of one another when we failed to properly control our biological needs. But beyond the day when I became the unlucky recipient of The Spanking, there is one other unsavory kindergarten memory that’s seared into my brain: the time my teachers shamed me for failing to understand an assignment’s directions.

You see, my early entry into schooling (and of being labeled as “gifted”) was precipitated solely by my literacy life—specifically, my reading and writing practices. Here’s the rub: I could successfully

decode words (thanks, *Sesame Street!*) and had become quite adept at both writing my name and copying words that I was intrigued by. But like many children who lack sufficient background knowledge, I had zero clue what I was reading—or writing—the vast majority of the time. I was 4, remember; my life experiences as a White girl growing up in rural Maine didn't extend much beyond playing with Matchbox cars, rolling precariously down grassy hills, and watching *Bozo's Circus* every morning.

Thus, when the time came for me to actually apply my decoding and encoding skills to meaningful tasks, like deciphering the directions on a worksheet, I felt like one of the villains in *Scooby-Doo* during each episode's Great Unmasking: I was a fraud, a sham, an imposter. Most of the time, the activities my classmates and I were invited to do in our kindergarten spaces—cutting and pasting, learning to play leapfrog—were important (and fun!). And I excelled at a lot of them. This one task, however, was different—and Reader, I choked. I tried so hard to wrap my brain around what my teachers were directing us to do (something to do with mailing addresses? I still don't know), but my little 4-year-old brain just couldn't figure it out. In response, they pursed their lips and glared at me from behind their giant spectacles, convinced I was being purposefully defiant. I stared down at my worksheet and cried while some runny-nosed 5-year-old—most likely a Tommy or a Jason or a Kenneth—snickered at how “dumb” I was. (They were decidedly proficient at whipping out such ableist slurs at a moment's notice, those kids.) After what seemed like hours, one of my teachers heaved a giant sigh. “Go sit on the rug,” she barked, her hands resting on her polyester-clad hips. “I'm calling your mother.”

I share this story because, while my memory may be somewhat unreliable 42 years later (although I don't think so! Those teachers were downright *scary*), it illustrates the sheer lack of support I felt as a student of literacy in my first “official” classroom space. However, it's also important to acknowledge that this was one of very few utterly degrading moments I experienced throughout my K–12 schooling as a White, cisgender, able-bodied girl whose literacies and languages outside of school matched, with uncanny precision, the literacies and

languages that were, and continue to be, privileged and taught in school spaces. Like a good number of my peers, I grew up in a home with an unending supply of books featuring characters who looked and talked like me; my lived experiences often reflected those of the fictional children I read about in mathematical word problems and on standardized tests. Heck, the very ways *I matched letters and sounds together* were—and still are—considered “universal” or “standard.” You know how some parents ask children questions that they already know the answer to but pretend not to (e.g., *What should you be doing right now?*) instead of telling them directly to do something (e.g., *Get your shoes on, please*)? Even those specific discourse patterns—the ones I was accustomed to using at home—matched those that my own teachers engaged in. School—and school-based literacy—was, quite frankly, designed with children like me in mind. As we know all too well, this is entirely not the case for far too many children and youth—most often, Black, Brown, and Indigenous children and youth—whose rich and diverse literacies and languages often do *not* match those most valued in schools (Baker-Bell, 2020; Kinloch et al., 2017).

WHAT EXACTLY IS “STANDARD” ENGLISH?

In his piece “Reading ‘Whiteness’ in English Studies,” rhetoric and composition scholar Timothy Barnett (2000) argues that notions around “standard” English fail to illuminate what he calls the “white ground” (p. 10)—the ideological, if often invisible, positioning that considers White, middle-class ways of speaking and writing as superior to non-White ways of speaking and writing and that perpetuates White dominance in academic/educational spaces.

The idea of there being such a “standard,” maintained both by academic elites and by K–12 practitioners, is a perfect example of the ways in which oppression “hides” in broad daylight when it comes to literacy practices, policies, and curricula—and its potential for enacting harm can begin early on in a child’s school experience. For example,

scholars of African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, have long identified some common phonological differences between speakers of AAVE and speakers of White Mainstream English* (Baker-Bell, 2020), including “r”-lessness, “l”-lessness, and the “simplification” of final consonants (such as when dropping or reducing the final “d” in the word “friend”). Unfortunately, many educators consider these phonological features to be deficits (i.e., *substandard*), leading some Black children to be misidentified early on as in need of literacy intervention. (I circle back to this phenomenon in Chapter 4.) A good number of literacy assessments most commonly used to screen children for reading and writing difficulties perpetuate this practice, devoting only a few sentences in their scoring guides to warning educators about “penalizing” a student for “varied pronunciation due to consistent dialect, accent, or articulation differences” (University of Oregon, 2021, p. 49).

*In her book *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, Dr. April Baker-Bell (2020) uses this term in place of “Standard American English” in order to highlight the relationship between language, race, and racism.

Why This Book? Why Me? Why Now?

If you’re a critical consumer of professional books like the one you now hold in your hands, you may be thinking, “Why should I be turning to you—a self-described White, cisgender, able-bodied woman—to teach me about anti-oppressive literacy education? Why shouldn’t I be reading Drs. Gholdy Muhammad, Liza Talusan, Kimberly Parker, and Felicia Rose Chavez?” To that I say, *you 100%, unequivocally should*. This book is not meant to supplant, undermine, or appropriate the work of these important author-educators, nor that of the work of scholars like Dr. Laura Jiménez and Jessica Lifshitz and Nawal Qarooni, who generously share their work and thinking about literacy and education frequently both on and off social media. Rather, this book is meant as a humble companion to the work of these scholars whose shoulders

I stand on; a curation of everything I have learned and, more importantly, *unlearned* about teaching literacy over the quarter century that I have spent as an educator and the almost half century (gulp!) I've spent as a human being in community with others.

This process has not been easy; no learning process is perfectly linear, and it's all the more true when we, particularly we White folks, have been socialized to be complicit in the oppression of others, whether it's due to the racial, social, political, or professional power we have (or have at particular times, in specific contexts). Fortunately, there are actions that we can take, *starting today*, to build the mindsets and habits necessary to help us collectively and consistently work toward developing an anti-oppressive practice. Not only will this book highlight some of the concrete actions we can take in order to make our literacy practices more inclusive and humanizing, it will offer the *why* behind them—the reasons why these practices are so essential—all of which is contextualized through a sociohistorical lens that helps us understand precisely how we got to where we are today.

In addition, as a middle-aged White woman in a profession teeming, statistically speaking, with middle-aged White women (Will, 2020), I feel a compelling obligation to, as the saying goes, “collect my people” and share what I have learned in order to help others learn as well. For many years, I was a card-carrying member of the “system is broken” crowd. (Sound familiar?) I would shake my head sadly, muttering at our country's “broken system” of education. It wasn't until I read Dr. Carol Anderson's book *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Nation's Divide* (2016) that I realized, mid-career, that the educational system was not *broken*, but rather was working *exactly as it was designed*—from its very inception. As I began to thread together the history of our education system and how literacy fits into this system, I realized with dawning horror the many specific ways in which I had been complicit not only in the continued oppression of children whose languages and literacies did not fit the dominant mold, but in the racist, classist, and ableist narrative that school-based literacies and language practices ought to be molded on White, middle-class, Eurocentric practices. *How could I have not seen this before?* I wondered.

TO CAPITALIZE OR NOT TO CAPITALIZE?

You may or may not have noticed that, in this book, I am choosing to capitalize all races and racialized identities, including “White.” While there is quite a robust debate around this practice, I have opted to capitalize both “White” and “Whiteness” when I am using these terms as racial and political concepts to signify their racial and political significance. (Shout-out to my colleague Lorena Germán for schooling me around this.) Too often, those of us who are White consider our Whiteness to be invisible or part of a “default” identity, whereas Black and Brown folks are situated as “other.” I wish to disrupt this practice by using the capital “W.”

This book is my attempt to help others “see”—see that the vast majority of literacy education in our nation’s K–12 schools works not to liberate but largely, instead, to oppress those who don’t fit the dominant, White, Eurocentric idea of what it means to be a reader, writer, and speaker. It is also designed to help educators consider the many ways in which we can proactively disrupt this oppressive system not only within our classrooms but within ourselves—particularly when done in community with, and accountability to, others. In doing so, though, I must acknowledge the tension around my taking on work like the writing of this book, which includes a constant negotiation around and assessment of when to “step up” and call in those who are also complicit in literacy-based oppression versus when to “pass the mic” so that the work of my colleagues who are disabled, transgender, and/or unprotected by the guise of Whiteness is heard and celebrated. After exploring the number of similarly themed professional books for literacy educators on the market and conferring with a number of colleagues, I made the decision to take this opportunity to model what this might look like as a White, cis, able-bodied woman with a specific, if limited, set of knowledges.

So the time, frankly, is now.

MIND THE GAP

The term “achievement gap” was first coined alongside the publication of the 1966 Coleman Report (officially titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*), which, among other things, examined the standardized test results of students of varying racial and ethnic identities and found a considerable difference between their performance on the tests—even while at the same time acknowledging that these assessments, and others like it, are not “culturally fair” and are in fact “[designed] . . . to determine the degree to which a child has assimilated a culture appropriate to modern life in the United States” (Coleman et al., 1966, p. 218).

Forty years later, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) implored educators, researchers, and policy makers to “call into question the wisdom of focusing on the achievement gap as a way of explaining and understanding the persistent inequality that exists (and has always existed) in our nation’s schools,” arguing that, in truth, what we have is not an *achievement* gap, but rather an “education debt.” Other scholars, among them American sociologist Prudence L. Carter and education professor Kevin Welner (2013), have proposed the term “opportunity gap,” pointing out that achievement and opportunity are “intricately connected. Without one, you cannot have the other.” We will examine the “gap” concept more thoroughly in Chapter 1.

How to Get the Most out of This Book

While this book will offer a variety of ways in which we might revise our practices as literacy educators in order to make them more inclusive and anti-oppressive, it’s important to acknowledge that sustained change cannot happen in a vacuum. Schools reflect the communities that they serve, and a community that does not support—let alone work to implement—the kinds of large-scale changes that are necessary for disrupting dominant (e.g., White, patriarchal, cis-hetero,

Christian, able-bodied) norms is bound to obstruct or undermine any attempt at this kind of change within a school. For more on this, check out some of the research on successful school-community partnerships that I recommend.

SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

There is a vast collection of research that demonstrates how important it is for schools and communities to work alongside each other to increase positive outcomes for all, particularly when it comes to issues around equity and access. While Chapter 4 offers some guidance for getting to know our students' families, the following texts are also among those that I have found most helpful to understanding how to create effective school-community partnerships that avoid perpetuating existing power dynamics:

"From Positivism to Critical Theory: School-Community Relations Toward Community Equity Literacy" by Terrance L. Green (2017)

"Beyond Involvement and Engagement: The Role of the Family in School-Community Partnerships" by Amanda Stefanski, Linda Valli, and Reuben Jacobson (2016)

"Fostering Educational Resilience and Opportunities in Urban Schools Through Equity-Focused School-Family-Community Partnerships" by Julia Bryan, Joseph M. Williams, and Dana Griffin (2020)

"Strong School-Community Partnerships in Inclusive Schools Are 'Part of the Fabric of the School. . . We Count on Them'" by Judith M. S. Gross, Shana J. Haines, Cokethea Hill, Grace L. Francis, Martha Blue-Banning, and Ann P. Turnbull (2015)

"Meeting, Knowing, and Affirming Spanish-Speaking Immigrant Families Through Successful Culturally Responsive Family Engagement" by María L. Gabriel, Kevin C. Roxas, and Kent Becker (2017)

In addition, because I am a White woman educator who has largely worked in predominantly White schools and communities, it is essential to read this book in partnership with works (books, articles, social media posts, etc.) written by educators whose identities and lived experiences differ from my own. I have taken great care to amplify and cite the work of many of these folks throughout these pages. That said, it will be important to read Chapter 1, in which I lay out my anti-oppressive literacy education framework and its guiding principles, before diving into any of the other chapters. The succeeding chapters (Chapters 2–6) more deeply explore each of the guiding principles of the framework and are arranged in a way that makes it easy to “dip in and out” of those that you find the most novel or interesting and read them in the order you choose. However, I must emphasize that these principles overlap and are not meant to be studied or embodied in isolation, but as part of a comprehensive educational praxis. As part of that praxis, each chapter will offer some suggestions for engaging in “internal” as well as “external” work that you might take on as someone committed to anti-oppressive literacy education. *Please do not skip or gloss over the internal work!* Doing so will prevent us, as a collective, from building the capacity necessary to sustain this work over the long term and to transfer the insights we’ve gained through engaging in such work to diverse situations and environments. And build capacity we must!

To my Black, Brown, Indigenous, and AAPI colleagues: Some of my “internal work” suggestions might cause you discomfort. While some level of discomfort is okay (and even useful for growth), please be mindful of when the discomfort veers into a place that feels harmful and shift your focus to caring for yourself.

Finally, a caveat: engaging in anti-oppressive work is 100% best done in community with others who have shared goals. It can often be tough, to say the least, to find allies and co-conspirators who are willing—and able—to take the risks necessary to disrupt dominant norms and practices. If possible, try to find folks to explore this text with, whether

it be in person or virtually, and commit to holding one another (and me, too!) in loving accountability to the kind of literacy practices and mind shifts that, ultimately, will serve the readers and writers with whom we work in the ways that they truly deserve.

ACCOUNTABILITY & ALLYSHIP

In her essay “Developing a Liberatory Consciousness,” consultant, author, and lecturer Dr. Barbara J. Love (2013) writes about the four elements necessary to being an effective liberation advocate which are “meant to serve as reminders in our daily living that the development and practice of a liberatory consciousness is neither mysterious nor difficult, static nor fixed, or something that some people have and others do not” (p. 600). These elements are *awareness*, or living life “from a waking position,” which allows us to take notice when oppression occurs; *analysis*, which builds upon these noticings, seeks to understand them, and determines what ought to be done to disrupt them; *action*, or speaking up when oppression occurs and organizing around shared anti-oppressive goals; and *accountability/allyship*, which involves a commitment to working in community and collaboration with others who are invested in disrupting and dismantling oppression. Dr. Love writes, “Accepting accountability to self and community for the consequences of actions taken or not taken can be an elusive concept for a people steeped in the ideology of individualism,” but that we must “always question, explore, and interrogate ourselves about possibilities for supporting the efforts of others to come to grips with our conditioning into oppression, and give each other a hand in moving outside of our assigned [social] roles” (p. 603).

Internal Work

- Consider your own literacy history. What experiences do you remember from your childhood/youth (both inside and outside of school)? How might this have shaped your notions about what it means to be “literate”?
- In this introduction, I’ve offered some insight into some of my own varied and complex identities. What are yours? How would you describe your race, ethnicity, gender, first language? Are you able-bodied or disabled? Neurotypical or neurodivergent? What is your immigration status? Reflect on how you think these identities shape you as both a learner and an educator. (*You can read more about identity and how it relates to power and oppression in Chapter 3.*)
- Were your K–12 school literacy experiences designed with someone like you in mind? How do you know? If not, how do you wish things had been different?

External Work

- List three to five students you have (or have had) who you consider to be “successful” readers and/or writers. What qualities or practices make them “successful” in your mind? Then, list three to five students you consider to be “struggling” or “reluctant” readers or writers. Jot the practices or behaviors they engage in that cause you to include them in this list. What do you notice about the two lists? What patterns do you see? What do you wonder about them?
- More list-making! Think about who you are already in community with (or who you might *want to be* in community with) around this work. Together, begin to brainstorm a plan for action. How will you engage in this work together? How often will you meet to check in and discuss what’s going well or what’s not going well? In what ways will you hold yourself accountable to one another (and to your students)?



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CHAPTER 1

The Anti-Oppressive Literacy Education Framework

The act of learning to read and write . . . is a creative act that involves a critical comprehension of reality.

—Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987), *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*

In this chapter, I plan to introduce the anti-oppressive literacy education framework that I’ve developed with you all. But first, I want to share a story of how what some perceive to be “good intentions”—something most educators have an abundance of!—can inadvertently cause harm.

In September of 2012, I was working as a literacy specialist and coach in a small K–6 school in rural New Hampshire. Although I could do without the lunch duties and the endless meetings and the dozens of trips to the microwave to reheat my long-suffering cup of morning coffee, I loved my job. I loved my colleagues, who graciously invited me to co-plan and co-teach with them as much as our busy schedules would allow. I loved my principal, who truly understood how messy and nonlinear and beautiful learning could be. Most of all, I loved my students, who were constantly surprising me with their noticings and their wonderings and the ways in which they taught me what it meant to be a reader and a writer.

That same month, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, creators of the F&P Text Level Gradient and two of the leading voices in reading instruction, put out a white paper through their publisher that explained

their decision to make “minor adjustments” (2012a, p. 1) to the grade-level reading goals on their gradient, which had long been a ubiquitous tool used in schools across the country. These adjustments—minor though they appeared on paper, and despite the authors’ warnings to educators about using the new gradient to identify more children as being “at-risk” as readers—ultimately increased the literacy expectations of children in kindergarten and Grade 1 due to what the authors perceived as evidence that young children’s literacy development was increasing at a rapid rate. In their white paper, they pointed to the fact that children were living in a world “substantially different” from that of a decade prior; that preschools were more frequently incorporating literacy into their play-based programs; and that “many children” were now entering kindergarten “with a strong foundation of knowledge surrounding literacy” (p. 1). In addition, they cited numerous studies that demonstrated “a steady trend upward” (p. 2) in the literacy skills of children who’d previously been enrolled in full-day kindergarten, which matched their own on-site observations, interviews, and data collection.

THE F&P TEXT LEVEL GRADIENT

The F&P Text Level Gradient™ is a tool designed by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell that was originally intended to be used by classroom teachers and other literacy professionals in selecting books to use for small-group reading instruction. However, in practice, it is most often used in conjunction with their Text Level Ladder of Progress (2012b) as a guide to determine where students should “be” as readers at the end of a particular grade level. Despite the authors’ consistent suggestions that educators adjust their expectations of students as readers “based on school/district requirements and professional teacher judgment” (2012a, p. 2), too often it is used as a tool to label children as “in need of intervention” if they do not reach the suggested grade-level goals at various points throughout the school year. You can read more about this tool and its intended uses at <https://www.fountasandpinnell.com/textlevelgradient/>

As a result of all of this, the authors wrote (2012a), “recommended entry-, mid-, and exit-level [reading] goals, as well as intervention goals, must change” (p. 2). The revised F&P Text Level Gradient™

- offered clearer delineations between grade-level expectations,
- removed all overlaps between grades
- included higher text-level expectations for readers at the end of kindergarten and Grade 1

Let’s set aside, for now, that the idea of a child reading “on level x ” is in itself a fallacious concept due to variations in their background knowledge, first language, and interests. (the authors themselves had previously conceded this in their book *Guiding Readers and Writers (Grades 3-6): Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy*, stating that “individual students cannot be categorized as, for example, ‘level M readers’” [Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 225]). According to the revised gradient, a student in Grade 1 reading at a Level C in October—previously considered to be “on track” with their peers—would, under the guidelines of the new gradient, suddenly appear to be severely below grade level and in dire need of reading intervention.

This consequence of the revised tool was alarming in itself, and my colleagues and I, after much deliberation, opted to reject it—something Fountas and Pinnell are *clear to note* is an acceptable choice—in an attempt to resist what we considered to be yet another unfair increase in literacy demands for children. (Around this time, the Common Core State Standards had just been released, and we were pretty salty about the accompanying push for ever-greater “text complexity” across the grades as well, which—again—served to increase the number of students who were thereafter identified as “in need of intervention.”)

The Importance of Paying Attention to Research—and to How It’s Interpreted

Equally alarming, however, and something I did not fully realize until several years after first reading their 2012 white paper, was

that some of the studies that the authors cited—and used to make their revisions to the gradient—were troublesome. For example, one study they cited (Votruba-Drzal et al., 2008) revealed the following deficit-laden belief, couched as fact, in an attempt to argue the benefits of full-day kindergarten: “Children from economically disadvantaged households *tend to experience less consistent, supportive, and cognitively stimulating caregiving* than those from middle- and upper-class families” (p. 958; emphasis added). In my view, knowing that the researchers behind this study hold such beliefs—enough to state them explicitly in this paper—renders the research itself problematic.

If the research itself was not problematic, the revision to Fountas and Pinnell’s Text Level Gradient based on *their interpretation of the research* was. In another study they cite in their white paper (Ackerman et al., 2005), the researchers note that the academic/literacy benefits of attending full-day kindergarten “seem to be greater for disadvantaged children” (p. 11). But the increased reading expectations that would result from accepting and implementing the revised gradient would, in effect, mean that those same children would perceptually lose any literacy “advantage” they had potentially gained from attending full-day kindergarten. If more educators had paid attention to these citations—and how they were ultimately used to guide the revision of the F&P’s Text Level Gradient™—would there have been greater resistance to the revised tool and its accompanying increase in expectations of student readers? Would we have anticipated the influx of deficit-minded ideas around how many students were now, suddenly, “in need” of intervention? Perhaps; perhaps not.

All of this is not to pick on Drs. Fountas and Pinnell, whose work I greatly respect and who have contributed an enormous amount to the field of literacy education. (While I focus on this particular example here, you will see, as you move through this book, that I am an equal-opportunity critic—including of my own practice as an educator. Rather, my intention is to illustrate the often unintended—but nevertheless real—harm that can result from failing to use an anti-oppressive framework to enact literacy practices, policies, and curricula. Sadly, this is but one of an overwhelming number of examples I could have used to illustrate how resulting policies or changes

in practice, even those that are well-intended, can contribute to the oppression of our most vulnerable students. Our profession—nay, our country’s very *history*—is full of them.

DEFINING OPPRESSION

Founded in 1987 by a group of progressive philanthropists dedicated to supporting equity and justice efforts, the Chinook Fund (<https://chinookfund.org>) uses the generally accepted definition of oppression, which conceptualizes it as being the result of prejudice plus power. However, they have gone a step further in order to identify *four specific types of oppression* (Chinook Fund, n.d.):

- *ideological oppression* (based upon a dominant group’s *ideas* about another group);
 - *institutional oppression* (that which is embedded in societal institutions like education, health care, and the legal system);
 - *interpersonal oppression* (e.g., the kinds of prejudicial mistreatment that happen between individuals or groups of people); and
 - *internalized oppression* (when members of an oppressed group come to believe that they’re deserving of discrimination or disrespect due to their own inherent failures).
- Playwright and actor Eliana Pipes, in collaboration with the Western Justice Center, created a short video explaining each of these four types of oppression called *Legos and the Four I’s of Oppression* that’s 100% worth checking out (<https://youtu.be/3WWyVRo4Uas>).

“Gap” Language and the History It Obscures

Take the omnipresent narrative of America’s literacy “achievement gap.” While the “gap” terminology was not coined—or propagated by the media—until the mid-1960s (see my introduction for a brief history around this), the hard truth is that we have *always* witnessed a “gap” in the ways in which literacy has been in/accessible to those

living on this land. For example, in the decades leading up to the Civil War, many Southern states made it outright illegal to teach enslaved Africans to read or write for any reason other than to promote “Bible literacy.” The main purpose of this one allowance was to maintain religious devotion to White, Christian values. Teaching or promoting what historians called “liberating literacy” (Clifford, 1984; Cornelius, 1983)—i.e., literacy that promoted an individual’s social mobility and/or contributed to a diversity of thought—to those who were enslaved was punishable by steep fines (if the person was considered White) and physical punishment or jail if the person was not (e.g., was a free Black person). Even in states where schooling for free Black children existed—for example, in Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania—“suspicion and surveillance of black education prevailed” (Givens, 2021, p. 11).

Once the Civil War ended and Reconstruction was underway, the number of schools established for the education of both White and Black children exploded, and the “gap” persisted in areas of the United States where the literacy education of Black children was systematically disrupted. In some cases, this disruption was perpetrated by White property owners who refused to lease their land for the purpose of building schools that would educate African American children (Scribner, 2020); in other cases, White folks attempted to destroy schools entirely (such as in Virginia, where “Black schools and churches used for educational activities were routinely burned” [Givens, 2021, p. 32]).

DISRUPTING, DISMANTLING, AND DREAMING

Despite the ways in which gatekeepers of literacy in the United States have built systems and created policies that oppress communities of individuals unprotected by Whiteness, these communities and individuals have engaged in powerful campaigns throughout history that actively resist these efforts—even (and often) when their very lives were/are at stake. For example, despite slave codes throughout the antebellum South prohibiting the teaching of enslaved folks to read and write

English, thousands of enslaved individuals nevertheless acquired English print literacy through subversive means, such as teaching what they'd learned from being in proximity to their masters and mistresses during the day to other family members at night under the cloak of darkness (Cornelius, 1983).

Post-Emancipation, under the tyranny of Jim Crow, many African Americans created literary societies for themselves “when access to formal institutions was denied or when the opportunities in formal institutions [e.g., American schools] was substandard” (Fisher, 2004). In the late 1960s, student activists who were part of the Chicano movement fought for the right to speak their native language, Spanish, in school spaces. And in 2017, seven student plaintiffs in Detroit, Michigan, sued then-governor Rick Snyder over deplorable school conditions that they claimed violated their right to a “basic minimum education,” which includes the opportunity to learn to read and write at a “functional” level (*Gary B. v. Snyder*).*

*You can read more about how literacy has historically been used as a tool of oppression, and how marginalized communities have fought against these efforts, in Chapter 6.

This “gap,” of course, was perpetuated not just among Black children but among Indigenous children as well. In the mid-17th century, beginning with the establishment of the Virginia legislature’s plan to “bring them up in Christianity, civility, and the knowledge of necessary trades” (Bremner, 1970, p. 4), Indigenous children were kidnapped from their families and forced to suppress their Native literacies and languages in order to assimilate to White, Eurocentric notions of what it meant to be “literate.” While both Chinese and Japanese children were systematically excluded from public schools in California throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Japanese-language schools in Hawaii and California were specifically targeted by U.S. legislators concerned by a fear of “anti-American sentiment” (Douglas, 2015). And during the mid-20th century, segregated Latinx and Hispanic students often had only the secondhand books they could scrape up from neighboring White schools

to read and were paddled or otherwise punished for speaking their native language on school grounds (Hennessy-Fiske, 2022; Ruiz, 2001).

WHITENESS

It is important to keep in mind that the protection of Whiteness, or what critical race theorist and legal scholar Dr. Cheryl I. Harris (1993) calls “the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white” in America (p. 1713), has not always been conferred onto those with light skin and other external physical characteristics. For example, certain heritage classes or ethnic groups who emigrated to America in the early 20th century who are *now* considered to be White (e.g., Irish, Italians) were not initially offered the protection of Whiteness. In addition, while the U.S. Census Bureau currently defines “White” as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (<https://www.census.gov>), many members or descendants of these populations, particularly within the latter two regions, are often not awarded the societal privileges associated with Whiteness.

Two resources that I have found useful in developing my own understanding around the fluidity and complexity of Whiteness—and of race in general—are the three-part video series *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (Pounder et al., 2003) and *Seeing White* (Biewen, 2015), a 14-part documentary podcast from Scene on Radio and the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

I could, of course, go on. The truth of the matter is that the literacy “gap” that we have witnessed play out over time in the “achievement” scores of White children versus those who do not benefit from Whiteness is nothing new and cannot possibly be understood without

understanding how our dominant literacy educational practices, both in school and out, are *designed to uphold this gap*. Please understand, however: This is not to equate, say, the burning of schools that educated Black children during Reconstruction with the revising of a popular tool used to assess readers and/or the accessibility of print text. My goal here is only to point out that there is an inherently oppressive thread that connects these actions together over the course of a long and complex history. And while embracing an anti-oppressive literacy education framework will not itself repair all of the historical harm done to students or create a more just, equitable world, it is surely a step in the right direction.

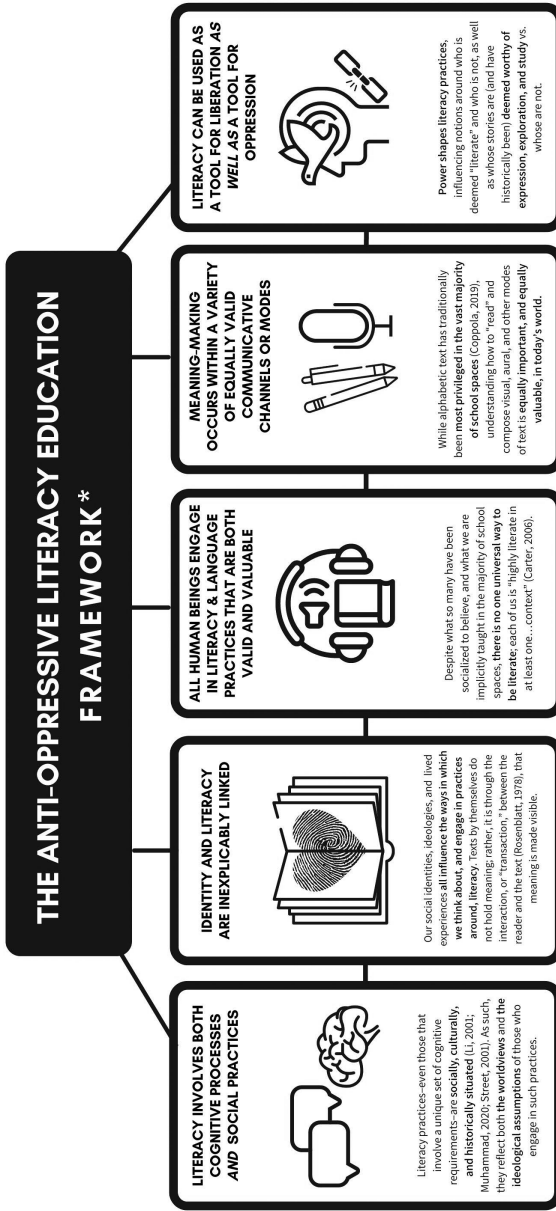
THE “LITERACY MYTH”

Coined in 1979 by the social historian and professor of English at Ohio State University Harvey J. Graff, the “literacy myth” refers to the exorbitant power attributed to literacy that diminishes (or, in some cases, outright ignores) the effects that social and structural inequalities based on race, ethnicity, class, and other attributes have on the lives of individuals. In his 2010 essay “The Literacy Myth: Literacy, Education and Demography,” Graff writes that “part of what makes . . . assumptions about the benefits of literacy a myth is that they are not universally true” (p. 18), although he concedes that the development of dominant forms of literacy *does* often play a part in individuals’ ability to attain social, economic, and political capital (e.g., through occupations that rely on print literacy). I highlight his work here to emphasize that the embracing and enacting of the anti-oppressive literacy framework that I lay out in this book is not meant to be a panacea for all of education’s (or society’s) ills, and must be enacted *in conjunction with* other policies and practices that work toward creating a more just and equitable world for all.

The Anti-Oppressive Literacy Education Framework

The framework (Figure 1.2) for enacting anti-oppressive literacy practices, policies, and curricula that I have developed and will elaborate on throughout this book arose out of the key values and principles I've identified as essential to embodying this kind of work. And I want to be 100% honest: Over the almost 25 years that I have been an educator, I have engaged in many, many practices and policies and used or designed a number of curricula that have decidedly *not* been anti-oppressive in nature. I am not perfect, nor do I believe that I—or anyone else, for that matter—will ever be entirely “anti-oppressive.” I am a member of numerous communities and institutions, both literal and metaphorical, that were built in a way that ensures the maintenance of White, cis-hetero, patriarchal, able-bodied privilege and power. I have also been socialized to maintain this power and privilege, which means I have a lifetime of learning and unlearning to do. For example, after a number of years of identity and resistance work in both my personal and professional life, I still sometimes default to a sexist, racist, and/or ableist mindset, particularly during times of stress or fatigue. This can show up in the ways I initially react when someone calls me out—or in—for a harm I have caused or when I make assumptions about, say, what types of literacy practices a student and their family engages in at home. However, I am committed to using every resource at my (often privileged) disposal to engage in this important work, and part of that is encouraging my colleagues to both *internalize* and *seek to educate others around* the following five key principles.

As you explore the framework, please note how the key principles and values I've included are not mutually exclusive, but instead overlap with one another to form a comprehensive mindset. In addition, please approach this framework as a dynamic one that will likely be further developed and refined over time in order to reflect new—and deeper—understandings.



* Educators who embody an anti-oppressive educational literacy practice both recognize and seek to educate others around these key principles.

Coppola, 2022

Figure 1.1 The Anti-Opressive Literacy Education Framework

Principle #1: Literacy involves both cognitive processes and social practices.

Literacy—and its attendant practices—is neither neutral nor apolitical. Part of why this is true is because, as many scholars have demonstrated, literacy practices are socially, culturally, and historically situated (Heath, 1982; Li, 2001; Muhammad, 2020; Street, 1984). As such, they reflect both the worldviews and the ideological assumptions of every person who engages in literacy practices. When we say that literacy is socially situated, we mean that despite prevailing ideologies, there is no single literacy practice—or set of practices—that can be decontextualized from the kinds of power structures that play out in society. What, how, when, and with whom we read, write, and speak is all tied up in how we are positioned, and how we position ourselves, within larger contexts and communities.

THE CYCLE OF SOCIALIZATION

Social justice educator Bobbie Harro (2013) developed her “Cycle of Socialization” in order to represent how the process of socialization begins, how it affects our lives, how it’s perpetuated by systems and institutions, and what happens when we disrupt the cycle in an attempt to create change. At the core of the cycle are the forces that often keep us *in* the cycle: fear, ignorance, power, and so forth. For example, before my students taught me the many ways that they make meaning beyond reading or writing exclusively print text, my ignorance kept me from questioning the overprivileging of print text in schools and classrooms (even despite what I was experiencing, and had experienced, through my own literacy practices; see more about this in Chapter 5).

Surrounding this core are the many ways in which our unquestioned beliefs and practices are both developed and maintained: through people we know and trust, through the media, through institutions such as schooling and health care, and so forth. As Harro writes, “Those who

stay in line [with our socialized beliefs and practices] are sanctioned, while those who don't are punished, persecuted, stigmatized, or victimized" (p. 46). The result of these enforcements is that the cycle perpetuates itself, maintaining inequities, misconceptions, and even, for those with less power, internalized oppression: "We live with or promote the status quo; we choose not to make waves; we do nothing, and the cycle continues."

For example, the fact that I am able to write and publish this very book you hold in your hands is connected to the power I have within the profession, which is itself connected to my dominant social identities. I have (somehow) built a reputation of being a knowledgeable, somewhat affable literacy practitioner who rarely misses an opportunity to point out why a practice is inequitable or why a text is problematic. The very fact that I feel comfortable doing this—despite the ways in which it has gotten me in hot water more than a few times throughout my career!—speaks to the social, professional, and even financial capital that I benefit from. And the fact that this reputation has gained me professional opportunities like the writing and publishing of this book must be acknowledged.

Alongside all of this resides the fact that print literacy—literacy that relies on the accurate decoding, encoding, and comprehending of written symbols and texts for communicative purposes (Purcell-Gates et al., 2004)—involves a particular set of cognitive requirements within each individual in order to establish proficiency. When we hear practitioners as well as non-educators referring to the “science of reading” (SoR), for example, this is typically what they are referencing: the need to teach individuals how to “crack the code” of letter-sound relationships *while also* teaching them how to comprehend written language. However, the vast body of research from which the SoR community draws, as well as the individuals conducting said research, cannot be separated from, or remain untouched by, social, cultural, and political contexts and forces. For example, many of the most oft-cited scholars (Linnea C. Ehri, Philip P. Gough, William E. Tunmer, Keith E. Stanovich, Louisa Moats,

Stanislas Dehaene, etc.) who conduct research around how individuals learn to read have come from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies (Heinrich et al., 2010) and are overwhelmingly White. In addition, when conducting research around the “science” of reading, most, if not all, of these scholars are conducting research around how individuals learn to read English or similar alphabetic texts; this, despite the fact that the majority of the world’s population “learn[s] to read and write in non-European, nonalphabetic orthographies” (Share, 2021, p. S391) such as Inuktituk, Arabic, and Japanese. Thus, it is important to understand all literacy practices as being influenced by and as influencing *both* social and cognitive forces.

When referencing the “science of reading” or the “SoR” in these pages, I am generally referencing the common discourse or movement that is most often reflected in the media and not the more comprehensive “sciences” of reading that include research conducted within the fields of sociolinguistics, cultural anthropology, rhetoric studies, and so on. I do so because it is the movement, alongside the powerful dyslexia lobby, that has had the greatest impact on both state and district literacy policies as of late.

Principle #2: Identity and literacy are inextricably linked.

Connected to the previous principle, our positionality—including our social identities, our ideologies, and the lived experiences that shape our position relative to power—influences the ways in which we think about, and engage in practices around, literacy. As I wrote in the introduction to this book, the fact that my languages and literacies very seamlessly matched the languages and literacies that I was exposed to and taught about in school spaces had an enormous influence on how I engaged in literacy practices throughout my K–12 experience. Not only that, but I grew up in a family where *everyone* read: books, magazines, catalogs, comics, cereal boxes, you name it. I never wanted for reading material, even if it came from the 10-cent table at the neighborhood yard sale, nor was I prohibited from reading anything I happened

to find. (Hello, V. C. Andrews and Stephen King!) I also spent a lot of time engaged in literacy-rich play at my grandparents' and friends' houses throughout my childhood; because each of these spaces was safe and secure, and because I always had enough food to eat and enough seasonally appropriate clothes to wear, I was rarely asked to help out with more than light chores or to watch my younger siblings and, instead, had enormous privilege and freedom to play card and board games, explore an inordinate number of (overflowing) bookshelves, and sing or dance to my heart's content.

In addition, as I mentioned previously, I almost always saw myself represented in the books that I read and that were read to me; as a result, I was highly motivated to read and had the confidence to stick with print texts that were somewhat challenging. For better or worse, my teachers and family members identified me very early on as a “writer,” too, which caused me to also self-identify as a writer. (I was convinced I was going to be the next Erma Bombeck or Dave Barry.) And while I devoured comics as a child, it wasn't until several years ago, when an explosion of graphic novelists and webcomic creators who identified as women came onto the scene, that I convinced myself to try my own hand at creating comics, which I dabbled in quite a bit for a hot minute. In short: Identity matters—in these ways and more—when it comes to our literacy practices, both in and out of the classroom.

Principle #3: All human beings engage in literacy and language practices that are both valid and valuable.

Here are some statistics for you:

- According to the 2019 edition of The Nation's Report Card (Conroy, 2021), 82% of Black fourth graders, compared to 66% of all fourth graders, were determined to be reading at a level below “proficiency.” 0% were assessed to be reading at an “advanced” level.
- Black children are less likely to be identified with dyslexia when compared to their White peers. At the same time, they are more likely to be referred to special education (Conroy, 2021).

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